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**‘The problem is, I’m not sure I believe in the thunderclap of trauma’: Aesthetics
of Trauma in Contemporary American Literature**

Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2005 novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), focusing on a nine-year-old boy’s traumatised response to losing his father in the attacks of 11 September 2001, polarised responses from reviewers and critics. The general hostility of newspaper reviewers is epitomised by Harry Siegel, writing in the *New York Press*, who accused Foer of arch opportunism, arguing that in choosing the novel’s key subject, ‘he snatches 9/11 to invest his conceit with gravitas, thus crossing the line that separates the risible from the villainous’.¹ Several literary critics, by contrast, approved of Foer’s formally experimental novel. Philippe Codde, for example, argues that it is precisely the failure of written language and narrative in the face of unrepresentable trauma that ‘has prompted the controversial form of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*,’ and that this is also ‘why both of Foer’s novels are such interesting and convincing representations of trauma’.² Vociferous debates regarding the literary representation of trauma are illustrated by strikingly divergent assessments of novels such as Foer’s. This essay considers those debates, focusing especially on how the discussion of trauma in America, where the phenomenon has so fully entered public discourse, has begun to influence both writers and, interdependently, critics and theorists. In the following I contend that a significant proportion of contemporary literature has reified elements of dominant trauma theory into an often prescriptive aesthetic. Elements of representation that were once highly experimental have become instead aesthetic tropes of the ‘trauma genre’. This essay also discusses a number of writers and texts which resist this trauma aesthetic, either through a rigorously deployed realism or through the

employment of more disruptive effects and subjects which have not, at least yet, become ossified into genre clichés.

Trauma genre writing conforms to approved conventions of theme and form in the representation of trauma deriving from prominent and widely disseminated theory. Particular problems of this representational matrix include the way in which its narrow definition of trauma has limited aesthetic practices to supposedly challenging but actually hackneyed disruptions to ordered narrative. The narrow dominant definition of trauma and the consequently limited aesthetic tropes of trauma genre writing are discussed further below. The trauma genre also persists in part through a limiting inward looking tendency whereby literature and criticism exist in a mutually reinforcing circuit. According to this scenario, writers may borrow from existing criticism in order to lend their works verisimilitude, while critics evidently see their positions validated by this theoretically orthodox literary practice. Trauma genre writing also tends to provide formulaic thematic and narrative arcs, whereby the rupturing effect of trauma will be followed by a redemptive process of working through. Elsewhere on this continuum is a genre I term here 'traumatic metafiction,' writing which is more likely to undermine conventions of trauma writing and to challenge accepted theories regarding the representation of trauma and its effects, through the development of narratives which violate the kind of accepted trajectory mentioned above, or through formal devices that more fully and precisely dramatise issues related to narrating trauma. By contrast, texts characterised here as comprising the trauma genre are inclined to adopt dominant theories of trauma into their structures in relatively unquestioning ways.

Another form of resistance to the increasingly programmatic tendencies of the trauma genre, as we shall see, involves a 'return' to a form of realism. As suggested

by Michael Rothberg in his (appropriately named) monograph, *Traumatic Realism*, a significant part of the effect of this mimetic tendency is to contest the dominant definition of trauma as something which is, in its exceptional nature, sublime and beyond representation. This challenge to assertions that trauma is therefore only representable through experimental discourse may be found, for example, in the deadpan realist prose of recent works by writers such as Carol Shields and Lorrie Moore. Before examining these types in more detail, it is necessary to summarise a few of the conventions of trauma discourse that have become established in the theoretical, cultural and literary fields.³

Trauma Culture

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was first defined according to particular reoccurring symptoms by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the third edition of the organisation's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III 1980)*.⁴ While the increasingly wide-ranging definitions of mental illness in this and subsequent volumes (see also *DSM-IV*, 1994) have proved extremely controversial – for example, provoking comment that the APA seeks to define all human behaviour as pathological and thus commercially treatable – that debate lies beyond the scope of this essay.⁵ The point here is that the symptoms described in *DSM-III*'s definition of PTSD gained much cultural prominence and provoked widespread popular interest in the concept of trauma. According to these definitions, PTSD's symptoms include intrusion, a tendency to re-experience the traumatic incident through unbidden flashbacks and/or nightmares, and hyperarousal, characterised by extreme heightened awareness and/or insomnia. These elements are often coupled – somewhat paradoxically – with constriction, neuroses that cause the patient involuntarily to avoid memories of the traumatising event, and which

operate through a process of either dissociation or repression. These neuroses produce a latency period, of indeterminate and sometimes permanent length, during which victims are unable to recall the traumatic causation. As we shall see, these definitions have been strikingly influential, especially in terms of the way in which trauma is understood at a wider cultural level.

While the various editions of the *DSM* were influential in terms of disseminating certain key understandings of trauma into a wider cultural field, Cathy Caruth's work has done much to expand its influence in cultural studies, not least in advancing influential arguments about the representation of trauma in works of literature. Employing a contentious synthesis of Freudian theory and post-structuralism, Caruth chooses not to focus in her work upon the trauma-inducing event, because PTSD 'cannot be defined...by the event itself'.⁶ Since events that produce traumatic symptoms vary so widely, Caruth insists that we look elsewhere for defining characteristics: 'The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception'.⁷ A fundamental part of Caruth's argument therefore rests upon identifying common strands to this structure of experience. One particularly influential component of this structure derives from the APA's assertion that trauma is the result of a single, sudden event, outside the realm of normal experience. Another aspect that was only a part of the APA definition, but which has come to assume overriding importance for Caruth and her followers is the notion, from Freud, of *Nachträglichkeit*. This idea suggests that trauma is always delayed, being too sudden and too overwhelming for it to be contemporaneously processed by the sufferer's consciousness: 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences

it'.⁸ The trauma victim thus dissociates from or represses the event, and begins to display various neuroses.

One's acceptance of an understanding of trauma underlain by definitions contained in the various editions of the *DSM* and in Caruth's writing depends on a few fundamental issues: firstly, that trauma is the result of a single overwhelming event; secondly, that it is the structured experience of trauma rather than its triggering event which defines the phenomenon, and thirdly that there is always a latency period. From these three claims flow certain consequences for the way in which trauma is understood and represented in artistic and literary artefacts. Of perhaps prime importance is Caruth's notion that in its status as something beyond everyday experience, trauma is also beyond understanding in language, and, as Ruth Leys's critique observes, its symptoms therefore 'stand outside representation'.⁹ This assertion appears to have persuaded many writers and artists to employ suitably unconventional narrative and formal means in order to demonstrate the impossibility of representing trauma and its effects. As we shall see, this can result in writers who adopt ostensibly challenging representational practices being especially lauded by critics for their treatment of trauma, even at the same time as this produces a kind of 'trauma kitsch'.

The Trauma Genre: Aesthetics and Criticism

The narrow way in which trauma has been popularly defined, according to an often simplified and sometimes contradictory synthesis of Freudian thought, definitions of PTSD from the APA, elements of Holocaust studies, and the works of theorists such as Caruth, has proved problematic. The key difficulty concerning us here is that a prescriptive understanding of trauma based on this range of popularised work has come to limit representations of trauma's effects, and to produce an identifiable

critically-approved aesthetic. The 'trauma genre', in other words, draws in relatively unquestioning ways upon a simplified and narrow range of those aspects of trauma theory most widely disseminated into popular culture. These include the notion that the traumatic event occurs with such sudden violence that it is not assimilated to consciousness. Victims are thus typically depicted as suffering symptoms such as involuntary flashbacks, nightmares, and cycles of repetitive, often self-destructive behaviour, without having access to memories of the originating cause. The trauma genre also attests to the inevitability of *Nachträglichkeit*, and its allied Freudian-Caruthian categories of melancholia and mourning, whereby the sufferer embarks on some form of therapy in an attempt to acknowledge and address the source of their symptoms. These concepts are dominant in contemporary trauma theory and they – or simplified versions of them – have found their way into the wider culture, and from there into the aesthetic of the trauma genre. While these symptoms and treatments unquestionably characterise a wide number of victims' encounter with trauma, however, it devalues the experience of and recovery from trauma to suggest that this is the only model. In seeking to endorse a universal template of the presentation of traumatic pathologies, the dominant aesthetic that has emerged from this narrow conception of trauma is similarly limited.

Generally confirming Caruth's claims that trauma is fundamentally beyond representation, the trauma genre aesthetic, as Luckhurst suggests, 'is uncompromisingly avant-garde', as writers seek structures that are 'experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions'.¹⁰ Critics' often favourable appraisals of such work have enabled the emergence of an identifiable canon of 'approved' trauma literature, conforming to various conventions. Anne Whitehead, for example,

affirms Caruth's reading of trauma by extrapolating it into an aesthetic whereby 'if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation', then this is only possible through 'a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence.'¹¹ Laurie Vickroy similarly insists that trauma narratives 'incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works.'¹² Luckhurst correctly notes that strongly prescriptive aesthetic programmes such as these have effectively shaped a genre:

texts are often brought together by critics as exemplary works because they are held to share a particular trauma aesthetic. This is sometimes explicitly stated in prescriptive terms, listing elements that must be included to establish membership of a proper or authentic literature of trauma. Because a traumatic event confounds narrative knowledge, the inherently narrative form of the novel must acknowledge this in different kinds of temporal disruption.¹³

Luckhurst clearly has in mind here a literary practice which employs certain disruptive formal techniques of postmodernism – most familiarly, perhaps, fragmented, non-linear chronologies, repetition, shifts in narrating voice, and a resultantly dispersed subjectivity – in order to represent the 'unrepresentable' trauma.

Some of the founding novels of postmodernism, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, indeed employ what were then startlingly disruptive techniques partly in order to represent the effects of historical traumas upon their protagonists. In America, similar techniques were used by E.L. Doctorow in *The Book of Daniel*, wherein the disrupted chronology, numerous shifts in narrating voice, and historiographic questioning through the merging of fact and fiction help to represent trauma. These techniques

also highlight the potential for depictions of trauma such as those in the works by Doctorow, Marquez and Grass to be politically radical, and one might add to these later diverse influential texts such as Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. There are, thus, a number of radical initiator texts that unwittingly help to define certain conventions for the literary treatment of trauma. As Luckhurst suggests, a problematic reification of representational modes occurred when the originality of these progenitor texts was lauded by critics:

There is something of a contradiction ... in affirming the centrality of innovation whilst identifying a specific (and sometimes prescriptive) trauma aesthetic. Paradoxically, the aesthetic means to convey the singularity of a traumatic aporia has now become highly conventionalized, the narratives and tropes of traumatic fiction easily identified.¹⁴

In other words, while foundational trauma texts such as those cited above were pioneering both politically and in terms of their aesthetic, once these techniques were accepted as conventions by critics and adopted as techniques by writers their effect was blunted.

In this respect, the controversy surrounding Benjamin Wilkomirski's 'faked' Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*, is particularly telling. Although published as an autobiography, *Fragments* was later revealed to be fictional, a trauma genre text that replicates a number of representational conventions so successfully that it was initially taken for genuine testimony. In the text, Wilkomirski lays claim to a latency period during which he was unable to recall or write about his experiences. The text also comprises familiar techniques such as fragmented chronology and splitting of the narrative voice at moments of thematic rupture. As Whitehead notes, 'In replicating the conventions of testimony, Wilkomirski produces a convincing account

of extreme trauma'.¹⁵ *Fragments* is thus only the most notorious example of writers adopting what had, by the end of the twentieth century, become generic conventions in order to produce their own 'convincing accounts' of trauma.

Other authors writing in the 1990s and afterwards may be identified as perpetuating what had become, by then, increasingly conventional methods of representing trauma, to the extent that such writing constructs an identifiable (and critically-supported) genre. When effects drawing upon this aesthetic are evident in later texts – Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, Pat Barker's *Another World*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* to name but three examples – any disruptive or disorientating effect upon the reader is inevitably lessened through familiarity. All three of these novels employ tropes including non-linear chronology and shifts in narrating voice, which had, by the mid-1990s, become familiar to readers. This means that when a reader acquainted with the tropes of the trauma genre encounters, for example, the breach in the narrative between parts one and two of Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*, the death of the protagonist's son, Matt, is actually remarkably predictable. These texts, and other ostensibly unconventional works, have nevertheless drawn significant praise from critics. For example, notwithstanding her reservations about the novel's approach to history, Whitehead approves *Another World's* incorporation of ghosts from the past in constructing a disrupted narrative that 'powerfully dramatises the notion of trans-generational haunting' and thus reinforces through its form and content certain key tenets of popular trauma theory.¹⁶

Interestingly, in relation to Michaels's novel, Whitehead notes that James Young 'has pointed out that the gathering of fragments is central to the process of Holocaust memorialisation'.¹⁷ This observation suggests a possible line of influence

between *Fugitive Pieces* and Foer's Holocaust novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, perhaps through precisely this argument of Young's. Foer's novel is marked not only by a plethora of the tropes of the trauma aesthetic – numerous repetitions and split, non-linear narratives, voiced by a range of characters, for example – but also by the literal playing out of this urge to collect fragments in the habits of its protagonist, Jonathan Safran Foer, who self-consciously travels with a supply of Ziploc bags in order to preserve found fragments of his ancestry. Although Foer (the author) arguably combines well-worn formal and thematic elements of the trauma genre through his protagonist's tendencies, his debut novel gained generally favourable comments in reviews and articles. Daniel Mendelsohn, for example, applauded the appearance in the novel of 'some of the most complex technical tricks you're likely to encounter in recent fiction,' which, he argues, comprise 'a remarkably effective way of dwelling on an issue of considerable urgency in Holocaust literature: the seemingly hopeless split between history and narrative, between what happened and what can be told.'¹⁸ In an even more rapturous review, Francine Prose, in the *New York Times*, declared that 'Not since...*A Clockwork Orange* has the English language been simultaneously mauled and energized with such brilliance and such brio,' and went on to praise Foer's formal strategies: 'the structure reveals itself slowly, in stages, and each one of these small revelations is a source of surprise and pleasure.'¹⁹ As we have seen, however, the non-linear, fragmentary and repetitive structure of *Everything is Illuminated*, built around incremental revelations, is actually a staple of the trauma genre.

Foer's is not an isolated case, and lavish reviews in widely circulated publications such as these promote the narrow trauma aesthetic here criticised. Numerous other ostensibly innovative trauma writers of the 1990s and beyond have

been similarly championed in both newspapers and academic journals. Alongside Michaels, Barker and Foer, one might mention works as apparently diverse as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, whose 1997 Booker Prize win ably demonstrated an emerging vogue for 'experimental' trauma narratives confirmed, moreover, by the 2011 Orange Prize awarded to Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*. In addition, we might include works by W.G. Sebald, who Luckhurst witheringly refers to as a 'traumatophile', or Don DeLillo's 2001 novella, *The Body Artist*. This is not to dismiss these texts out of hand. Indeed, a number of these works, for all their occasional drawing on genre aesthetics, also present an equivocal challenge to certain dominant elements of trauma theory. *The Body Artist*, for example, through its parodic imitation of popular trauma discourse (in the simulation of an interview feature with its protagonist, Lauren), and its ambiguous refusal of the neat closure provided by a conventional narrative model of trauma and recovery (given that Lauren arguably remains traumatised at the novella's end), demonstrates an awareness of debates in the field, but also a willingness to engage with and critique, rather than adopt them. The problem lies, rather, in these texts existing, albeit perhaps unwittingly, in a close and self-reinforcing relationship with certain forms of criticism. Authors and critics may be held equally to blame in this respect; the former for too unquestioningly adopting dominant, simplified and popularised aspects of trauma theory, the latter for finding confirmatory evidence of their theories in the works of these and other trauma authors. In particular, critics are not infrequently guilty of mounting tendentious readings of novels for precisely this aim. The parodic and ambiguous elements identified in *The Body Artist*, for example, have been largely ignored by critics who insist on imposing a 'recovery' ending. Anne Longmuir, for example, although she acknowledges certain elements of the novella's ambiguity,

insists that 'one thing seems clear: Mr. Tuttle appears in order that Lauren can work through her own grief and trauma'.²⁰

Clearly, a wider range of options than the narrow aesthetic that characterises the trauma genre is available for writers, and these options have not been entirely ignored. The mode I term traumatic metafiction is discussed later in the essay. Another mode adopted by some contemporary writers may be classed in part as a return to realism, drawing in part upon certain non-fiction techniques that have recently been (re)popularised through factual trauma memoirs. This new realism perhaps now represents a more effective technique for 'jolting' the reader than over-familiar postmodernist effects. Its tendency to adopt a deadpan narrating tone, for example, convincingly mimics the jaded, disconnected voice of the traumatised protagonist. Accomplished works that deal with trauma without recourse to the sometimes meretricious 'tricks' of trauma genre literature belie the latter's narrow and prescriptive aesthetic. Carol Shields's *Unless*, for example, communicates a thoroughly convincing and affecting depiction of family trauma, but the predominant register in the novel is realist, being chronologically linear, and defiantly non-experimental. Despite her refusal to employ the prescribed formal elements of the trauma genre, Shields is nevertheless clearly versed in the theoretical issues at stake. PTSD and its treatments are specifically – and knowledgably – mentioned in the novel, while towards its end her narrator, Reta, states 'I'm not sure I believe in the thunderclap of trauma'.²¹ She continues, expressing her doubts about 'the filigree of fine-spun theory' not only regarding the necessarily overwhelming intrusion of trauma, but also the existence of the latency period upon which PTSD and Caruthian theory depends.²² Unlike novels characterised above as trauma genre, *Unless* engages with existing theory but refuses to adhere slavishly to any doctrinal

requirements regarding the representation of trauma. Shields provides an essential example of someone who breaks the reinforcing circle of experimental literary techniques and, more importantly, suggests that the narrow genre aesthetic represents merely one way in which trauma might be addressed. Critics who hold too rigidly to this programmatic model of writing may thus be missing crucial exceptions to their rule and, indeed, lagging well behind actual literary practice.

A similarly sceptical, downbeat, disconnected but realist narrating voice can be found in the work of Lorrie Moore, most notably in her *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009). Like Shields, Moore provides a highly persuasive account of family trauma and, as she explained in an interview with *The Believer*, the potentially traumatising effect of broader political decisions, 'the way that the workings of governments and elected officials intrude upon the lives and minds of people who feel generally safe from the immediate effects of such workings'.²³ Moore similarly achieves this effect without employing the paraphernalia of postmodernist techniques generally demanded by the trauma genre. Like Shields, Moore demonstrates an awareness of debates, but critiques prescriptive assumptions regarding representation, not only through an apparently anachronistic realist mode, but also, for example, when characters openly state that when it comes to traumatic events, rather than therapeutic remembering, 'it is good to forget'.²⁴

A further problem of the trauma genre is that its aforementioned aesthetic 'rules' begin to shade into value judgements, both aesthetic and moral. Texts which exhibit the disrupted and fragmented experimental aesthetic are thus lauded by critics as morally superior, in ostensibly acknowledging trauma's complexity. This judgement may be familiar from Holocaust studies, where forms that mirror classic tropes of trauma tend to be valued, but has also emerged in studies of contemporary

trauma fiction. Luckhurst, for example, notes that Vickroy ‘identifies a “serious” and “authentic” trauma literature explicitly against a popular culture’.²⁵ Certainly, Vickroy’s study aims in part to establish whether particular trauma aesthetics function to ‘bring the reader into the disturbing but weighty aspects of the material,’ or whether they are, conversely, ‘too comforting’.²⁶ She links ‘self-reflexive, uncertain, ambivalent aspects’ of works’ trauma aesthetic and structure with their capacity to offer a ‘subversive’ challenge to ‘oppressive practices and relations’.²⁷ As Michael Rothberg has noted, however, ‘Precisely because it has the potential to cloud ethical and political judgments, trauma should not be a category that confirms moral value’.²⁸ As this suggests, in seeking to bestow moral and aesthetic value on a particular type of writing, critics may have exaggerated the alleged subversive qualities of what has in fact become a codified way of representing trauma.

Equally damagingly, many of the principal concepts of dominant trauma theory – especially the popularised conception of PTSD – have been so well absorbed into mainstream western culture that the existence of this body of thought has begun demonstrably to influence the ways in which writers of fiction engage with the subject, to the extent where one could envisage writers following these strictures precisely so that their works pass for realistic and convincing representations of traumatic pathology. Without overstating this claim, some of the previously cited works, as well as recent examples such as Nicole Krauss’s *Great House* and Yann Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil*, seem at the very least calculated to cater for a readership now well-versed in the formal aesthetic of trauma literature. In this respect, Luckhurst caustically comments that ‘New careers in trauma fiction are still being forged: Jonathan Safran Foer’s tragi-comedies of the Holocaust, *Everything is Illuminated* ... and 9/11, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* ... show every sign of

becoming canonical'.²⁹ This returns us conveniently back to the start of the essay, and the critical controversy surrounding Foer's second novel.

As suggested above, one of the most dubious aspects of the interdependency between contemporary fiction and criticism in the trauma genre is that the employment of elements from theory by fiction writers has been taken by critics as evidence of the validity of their positions. Indeed, a number of reviewers and critics in the field have constructed what amounts to a critical practice based on a search for elements in literary texts which endorse accepted tenets of trauma theory. This has arguably led to an iatrogenetic vicious circle, whereby dominant theoretical staples inspire works of fiction which are in turn taken to prove trauma theory's validity. To cite just one example, Whitehead finds that in *Fugitive Pieces*, 'In the childhood experiences of Jakob, Michaels encapsulates Caruth's notion of "missed" or "Unclaimed experience",' thus confirming a value in the fictional work's employment of the theoretical principle.³⁰

Articles on Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* also provide a useful illustration – indeed, some of the most egregious examples – of this collusive process. As quoted earlier, Codde approvingly registers the presence of dominant features of trauma theory in Foer's fragmentary narrative strategies. His article, however, neglects the extent to which Foer's text seems to draw upon extensively disseminated theories of trauma. Indeed, Foer works them through his text so mechanically, transparently, and programmatically that it is scarcely surprising that the novel conforms to trauma genre aesthetics. Similarly, Kristiaan Versluys applauds Foer's adoption of Judith Herman's notion of constriction – whereby trauma sufferers inadvertently aggravate trauma symptoms when trying to ward them off – as embodied in the character of Oskar's grandfather.³¹ Francisco Collado-Rodriguez

also writes approvingly of the formal qualities of Foer's work, while betraying his recognition that the roots of its aesthetic programme lie in the influential trauma theory of writers such as Caruth and Whitehead. Indeed, his essay provides a good example of the 'listing [of] elements that must be included' in an 'authentic literature of trauma' that Luckhurst criticised in the passage cited above. Unfortunately, instead of interrogating Foer's acceptance of theory and its transformation into literary form, Collado-Rodriguez sets out to test the fiction by its compliance with theoretical models: 'following Whitehead's views on trauma fiction, we should evaluate the existence of strategies related to experimentation Let us now consider if these strategies are traceable in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*'.³² Unsurprisingly, these elements are plentifully found and, accordingly, noted: 'Following the already typical patterns of trauma fiction, Foer has wisely combined testimonial elements with different subject perspectives to create a dialogical structure of witnessing that forces readers into an ethical evaluative position'.³³ The word 'wisely' is immensely telling; Foer is, in other words, praised for employing models established by theoretical work on trauma, not least since it reinforces the critic's own perspective. One might well conversely argue, however, that the methodology of Foer and numerous other authors mentioned above, constructing novels around the prescribed but trite devices of trauma fiction (multiple narrators, disrupted chronology, repetition, flashbacks etc.) produce texts that reinforce dominant but narrow understandings of trauma and thus address the experience on a superficial and, frequently, aestheticised level.

Traumatic Metafiction

As suggested above, certain writers have resisted the demands of the trauma genre. In their predominantly realist work Shields and Moore provide a successful antidote

to the ostentatiously avant-garde strategies of the trauma genre. The body of literature termed here 'traumatic metafiction' provides a challenge to the dominant aesthetic from a different direction. The label 'traumatic metafiction' is deliberately intended to evoke Linda Hutcheon's earlier term, historiographic metafiction. Just as the works of metafiction noted by Hutcheon self-consciously interrogated conceptions of history, so texts I would class as traumatic metafictions tend to engage with and critique theories of trauma. In other words – and provisionally for the moment – the contingencies of constructing a written narrative about trauma become a central subject for these traumatic metafictions. E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* form part of a lineage of novels that emphasises the process of narrating, in sometimes radical ways. In metafictions such as these, the narrating of trauma, long held by many theorists to be near impossible, is dramatised *alongside* the traumatic incidents themselves and their consequences. These texts therefore engage more critically with the precepts of trauma theory regarding representation, by foregrounding the narrator actually in the act of inscribing their narrative. In laying bare a number of questions crucially hidden by the conventionally unconventional aesthetic employed by the writers discussed above, this is a considerably more disruptive phenomenon than the combined prescribed elements of the trauma genre.

One decisive way in which the inscribed narrator is a more effective tool than methods used by writers of trauma genre literature is that it enables a sceptical attitude towards canonical criticism regarding the necessarily unrepresentable nature of trauma. Caruth, as the preeminent canonical critic, for example, recommends that writers avoid the fruitless task of representation, and instead aim to produce texts which *transmit* trauma to the reader, suggesting that to do otherwise risks, as Greg

Forter observes, 'betraying the bewildering, imperfectly representational character of traumatic memory'.³⁴ Two elements of this view have, more recently, come under attack: firstly, that trauma is a universal experience, and secondly, that trauma cannot be represented but only transmitted to the reader. The first assertion clearly risks theoretical defeatism, in positing trauma as a fundamental part of the human condition rather than a localised phenomenon that may be, moreover, addressed. In this respect, Dominick LaCapra has usefully sought to distinguish between two broad types of traumatic experience, which he terms absence and loss. Whereas absence is structural, general, and may indeed be understood as part of the human condition, loss is historical and located in specific events. LaCapra warns against conflating the two, as a number of critics are wont to do, since this produces 'the dubious idea that everyone (including perpetrators and collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma'.³⁵ In terms of representation versus transmission, Forter notes that Caruth's perspective makes it 'hard to imagine how we might *stop* transmitting historical trauma without also failing in the ethically crucial task of remembering (i.e. knowing about) such trauma'.³⁶ Diverging significantly from the model suggested by Caruthian trauma theory, fictional texts over recent years have successfully sought innovative narrative means precisely in order to represent trauma, its effects and the potential for recovery. It is worth spending a little time investigating exactly how works of traumatic metafiction carry out this representational and critical task.

E.L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* is a useful precursor to some of the more recent traumatic metafictions, both in terms of form and theme. The continual reminders that what we are reading is (a simulation of) the protagonist's Ph.D. thesis presents an act of inscribed narrating that serves to underline the psychological fracturing of the character of Daniel, traumatised by the political murder of his

parents, and the suicide of his sister. Daniel's experience of trauma is doubled in the use of inscribed narration: he re-experiences trauma symptoms – as evidenced in the abrupt switches between homo- and heterodiegetic voice – as he writes of the originating events. Doctorow's innovative formal approach to trauma mirrors the novel's unconventional thematic focus. Despite his profound experience of trauma and victimisation Daniel is a notably unsympathetic protagonist, prone to self-absorption, resentful anger and, it is implied, violent outbursts that reveal sadomasochistic tendencies. Daniel, in other words, is equally victim and perpetrator. Interestingly, a number of other more recent texts that employ inscribed narration – including Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* and Henry Roth's *Mercy of a Rude Stream* – focus on male characters who are culpable in perpetrating traumatic symptoms in other characters, as well as being themselves trauma victims. It might be argued that this thematic focus, an 'illicit' one in terms of conventional trauma theory, forces the more radically metafictional approach that we witness in these texts' employment of inscription.³⁷

Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel, *House of Leaves*, provides a similarly experimental treatment of the narrating voice, while simultaneously performing a critique of certain facets of dominant trauma theory. The novel is structured around a series of framed discourses each narrated by a different voice. This is signalled throughout by paratexts as well as text itself; the title page, for example, attributes the novel not to Danielewski, instead labelling it thus:

House of Leaves

by

Zampanò

with introduction and notes by

Johnny Truant

Zampanò and Truant are fictional characters of the text itself; thus even before we begin the narrative proper, the text challenges our expectations of an originating and identifiable narrating voice and thus any notion of its stable ontological bases. The narrative begins with Johnny Truant finding an unfinished and disorderly manuscript written by the recently deceased Zampanò that purports to provide an analysis of a film (fictional even in Johnny's world) called *The Navidson Record*. This film documents the traumatic experience of the Navidson family, on moving in to a new house in Virginia. The family begins to encounter uncanny events: an interior door mysteriously appears, behind which is a more or less infinite labyrinthine darkness which, flouting the laws of physics still further, continually alters its dimensions. The core of the ensuing narrative comprises Zampanò's 'description' (of course, actually a fictional reconstruction within the fictional layer of Johnny's reality) of Navidson's filmed record of his and others' explorations of this void, and their disastrous and traumatic consequences.

The text also includes Johnny's own inscribed narrative, his account of editing Zampanò's manuscript and a resultant growing paranoia in his everyday life, suggesting that traumatic incidents in Zampanò's narrative are transmitted on to him. In suggesting that trauma is readily transmissible across the novel's unstable ontological borders, the narrative here toys parodically with the more conventional Caruthian perspective on transmission discussed above. That this is a parodic treatment is suggested by Danielewski's aping of the discourse of trauma studies, specifically with regard to transmissibility. At one point Zampanò considers three competing psychological theories that purport to explain the traumatic after-effects of the events in the Navidsons' house:

In what remains the most controversial aspect of The Haven-Slocum Theory, the concluding paragraphs claim that people not even directly associated with the events on Ash Tree Lane have been affected. The Theory, however, is careful to distinguish between those who have merely seen *The Navidson Record* and those who have read and written, in some cases extensively, about the film.³⁸

Such transmissibility echoes not only genuine theories of trauma, but also Johnny's experience; as the (fictional) Haven-Slocum Theory suggests, sure enough he undergoes 'an increase in obsessiveness, insomnia, and incoherence'.³⁹ Zampanò's detailing of the competing trauma theories and their parodically transparent manifestation in Johnny's experience thus demonstrate Danielewski's awareness of actual academic debates in the field. As we shall see, this sceptical attitude towards trauma theory works in tandem with Danielewski's formal strategies concerning the acts of writing and narrating.

Katherine Hayles compares these strategies to those of *Heart of Darkness*, wherein, as is typical of realist narrative convention, for all its complexity, 'there is no recognition in the text of how these multiple oral narrations are transcribed into writing'.⁴⁰ By contrast, *House of Leaves* is precisely one of those rare novels that carefully stages the transcription of narration into writing that Hayles, Gérard Genette and others correctly note is conventionally elided. Clearly, this inscription of the narrating act represents a minor trend in the literature of traumatic metafiction; Doctorow's is an originating text in this sense, given that the narrative of *The Book of Daniel*, as suggested above, purports to be Daniel's Ph.D. thesis. Following his example, Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* gestures towards this act of inscription as he narrates his story of postcolonial trauma. More recent

examples of traumatic metafiction making use of the inscribed narrator include examples mentioned above, such as Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, with its indeterminate author-narrator surrogate lurking in the footnotes, and Henry Roth's *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, whose elderly and ailing autobiographical narrator figure tortuously inscribes his traumatic adolescence onto his wordprocessor, as well as Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* (2004), whose protagonist-narrator, Sidney Orr, actually seems to become disembodied when he is in the midst of writing down his various traumatic narratives. As if to demonstrate the contiguous character of the trauma genre-traumatic metafiction continuum described in this essay, even sections of Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* employ a degree of inscribed narration, in the forms of the various narratives sent between Alex and Jonathan.

According to these unconventional practices, the action of inscription involved in the narrating act itself becomes part of the narrative. Thus the complex narratives we encounter in novels such as Danielewski's incorporate into themselves a simulated version of the narrating act. These novels suggest that writers concerned with exploring the effects of trauma – including, evidently, upon perpetrators – find it useful to work their narrators' physical task of inscription into their texts. It is, of course, necessary to ask why this particular narrative strategy has become a marker of traumatic metafiction. One answer is simply that inscribed narration – at least until it, too, becomes over-familiar – offers a radical solution to the apparent impasse regarding the unrepresentability of trauma. In texts such as *House of Leaves* narrating trauma becomes, once more, an experimental act, fraught with doubt, rather than a means to prove certain tenets of existing theory. The misgivings of Johnny Truant, expressed through the numerous contradictions and paradoxes in the layered narratives of *House of Leaves*, or the agonised 'conversations' the

elderly Ira conducts with his computer over whether to include certain shameful events from his past in Roth's *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, constitute evolving and contingent commentaries on the trauma narratives with which these narrative acts are imbricated. In these works' widening the scope of the portrayal of traumatic symptoms to include perpetrators, moreover, the uncertainty communicated to the reader by their witnessing the narrating act in all its tortured contingency also conveys a measure of the crippling guilt which haunts the narrator-protagonists.

Perhaps more significantly, another notable effect of inscribed narration is its reintroduction of a chronological dimension into the narrating instance. This is a phenomenon that, as Genette points out, is actually very unusual in conventional texts: 'the fictive narrating of...almost all the novels in the world...is considered to have no duration; or more exactly, everything takes place as if the question of its duration had no relevance'.⁴¹ As the examples above suggest, however, a sense of narrating duration rarely portrayed since the days of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* has become increasingly common in traumatic metafiction.⁴² One way in which Danielewski explores this is through experiments in typography, wherein some pages are stupendously cluttered with text while others are virtually blank, respectively slowing down and speeding up the reading process. More significant than these ostentatious experiments in typography, however, is the very fact that Johnny's narrating instance possesses duration. The reader is regularly reminded of this unusual dimension; 'Three months have gone by', for example, by the time we get to Johnny's editing of Zampanò's third chapter.⁴³ This durational element should be understood as a direct and significant challenge to another aspect of trauma theory, especially as popularised through the concept of PTSD and through Caruth's work, namely the insistence that trauma is sudden and violent in impact.⁴⁴ Since we

are present alongside Johnny's narrating act we are able to witness the *gradually* traumatising effect of his encounter with the uncanny, as he edits and transcribes Zampanò's manuscript. This echoes the inscribed narrations mentioned above, with an incremental and gradual rather than a sudden experience of trauma detectable in the works by Doctorow, Rushdie, Roth, and Auster. In these instances, it is precisely the innovation in form which enables a critique of the widely accepted allegedly instantaneous facet of PTSD.

It is also significant that the time period of Johnny's discourse is ultimately revealed to be circular. To an extent this evokes the typical functioning of trauma, in suggesting that Johnny is locked into repetitive patterns of behaviour. Passages narrated by Johnny towards the end bear the same date as his introduction.⁴⁵ This circularity presents a further challenge to conventional trauma criticism, in this case to the emphasis placed upon the working through of trauma. In other words, powerful disruptions to the narrating process – including the breaking of narrative frames when Johnny himself encounters readers of a published version of *House of Leaves*, paradoxical elisions and disjunctions in the narratives of Navidson and Zampanò, and the frequently circular digressions entailed by the labyrinthine footnotes – suggest that this is a narrating instance unlikely to reach a resolution or conclusion. These disruptions render dubious any sense that the narrating act provides Johnny with a conventionally therapeutic sense of closure or recovery. This destabilising of the narrating process therefore signals that in *House of Leaves*, as in DeLillo's *The Body Artist* discussed above, we encounter a failed instance of working through, a proposition reinforced by the traumatised state in which Johnny remains even at the end of his narrating act. Again, texts employing a genuinely experimental form

alongside a more sceptical perspective enable a challenge to dominant models, in this case of the comforting notion that trauma is followed inevitably by recovery.

While the trauma genre employs ostensibly disruptive narrative devices, these have become over-familiar and generally form part of a conventional narrative of disruption followed by redemptive working through. They are likely to be used, as the discussion of responses to Foer's work suggested, in ways that reinforce rather than critique widely accepted perspectives on trauma. By contrast, Shields's informed critique of trauma theory demonstrates that experimental forms are not essential vehicles for thoroughly convincing examinations of the effects of trauma. At the other end of the spectrum, traumatic metafiction can be shown to use more radical and destabilising methods to present a sustained challenge to the tenets of trauma theory. Elements in *House of Leaves* and other texts, such as their beginning to turn discomforting attention to the experience of the perpetrator, complement radical disruptions at the level of form which similarly attempt to breach the moral and aesthetic prescriptions of trauma theory.

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Notes

- ¹ H. Siegel. April 20, 2005. 'Extremely Cloying and Incredibly False.' *New York Press*.
<http://www.nypress.com/article-11418-extremely-cloying-incredibly-false.html>
- ² P. Codde. 2007. 'Philomela Revisited: Traumatic Iconicity in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*', *Studies in American Fiction* 35(2), 249.
- ³ There is insufficient space here to provide a full history of the development and popular dissemination of trauma as a term. The best delineations of this process may be found in chapter one of Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (pp. 19-76) or Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* is the clearest articulation of her interpretation of Freud.
- ⁴ See R. Luckhurst. 2008. *The Trauma Question*, London: Routledge, 61-62.
- ⁵ For a polemical critique of this aspect of *DSM-IV* see Laurence J Davis's article in *Harper's Magazine*.
- ⁶ C. Caruth. 1995. 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction,' in C. Caruth (ed.), *Trauma Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 4.
- ⁷ Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction,' 4 (original emphasis).
- ⁸ Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction,' 4 (original emphasis).
- ⁹ R. Leys. 2000. *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 229.
- ¹⁰ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 81.
- ¹¹ A. Whitehead. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 6.
- ¹² L. Vickroy. 2002. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, xiv.
- ¹³ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 88. See also Wulf Kansteiner, who argues that 'the valorization of semantic excess and caesuras privileges narrow, selective perceptions of contemporary culture' (W. Kansteiner. 2004. 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor', *Rethinking History* 8(2), 215).
- ¹⁴ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 89.
- ¹⁵ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 37.

- ¹⁶ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 28.
- ¹⁷ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 60.
- ¹⁸ D. Mendelsohn. April 22, 2002. 'Boy of Wonders.' *New York Magazine*.
<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/5903/>.
- ¹⁹ F. Prose. April 14, 2002. 'Back in the Totally Awesome U.S.S.R.' *New York Times*.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/14/books/back-in-the-totally-awesome-ussr.html>.
- ²⁰ A. Longmuir. 2007. 'Performing the Body in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 53(3), 534.
- ²¹ C. Shields. 2002. *Unless*, London: Harper Collins, 263, 269.
- ²² Shields, *Unless*, 269.
- ²³ L. Moore. 2005. 'Keeping Your Fingers Crossed Makes it Difficult to Hold a Pen, But I must Say, It's Worth It.' *The Believer*. http://www.believermag.com/issues/200510/?read=interview_moore.
- ²⁴ L. Moore. 2009. *A Gate at the Stairs*, London: Faber and Faber, 243.
- ²⁵ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 89.
- ²⁶ Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, 7.
- ²⁷ Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, 7.
- ²⁸ M. Rothberg. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 90.
- ²⁹ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 87
- ³⁰ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 53
- ³¹ K. Versluys. 2009. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, New York: Columbia UP, 84-85.
- ³² F. Collado-Rodriguez. 2008. 'Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 32(1), 57.
- ³³ Collado-Rodriguez, 'Ethics in the Second Degree,' 59.
- ³⁴ G. Forter. 2007. 'Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form', *Narrative* 15(3), 260.
- ³⁵ D. LaCapra. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 64.
- ³⁶ Forter, 'Freud, Faulkner, Caruth', 280 (original emphasis).
- ³⁷ The 'illicit' quality would appear to stem from trauma theory's basis in Holocaust Studies, which, for obvious and justifiable reasons has little concern with investigating the trauma of the perpetrator.

Kansteiner's queasiness, as evidenced in the following quotation, is typical: 'The experiences of perpetrators and some bystanders of violence may still fit the trauma concept, but the pleasures of spectatorship can no longer be reconciled with even the most flexible notion of trauma. Moral honesty and conceptual and historical precision demand that trauma be first and foremost read from the perspective of the victim and only then carefully extended to explore other borderline phenomena' (214).

³⁸ M. Danielewski. 2000. *House of Leaves*, London and New York: Doubleday, 407.

³⁹ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 407.

⁴⁰ N.K. Hayles. 2002. 'Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*', *American Literature* 74(4), 784. Although she characterises its narrative strategies as comparatively simple, Hayles's mention of *Heart of Darkness* is nevertheless appropriate. Conrad's novel may convincingly be read as a much-imitated precursor text; Marlow displays numerous symptoms of trauma, while the narrating of his story to the crew of *The Nellie* may be interpreted as an early form of narrative therapy.

⁴¹ G. Genette. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. (Trans. Jane E. Lewin.) Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 70-71.

⁴² The terminology with regard to this phenomenon is somewhat opaque and a little imprecise. In *Narrative Discourse* Genette discusses it, as in the quoted examples, in terms of 'duration', which can lead to confusion as it is an entirely different phenomenon to that discussed elsewhere in the book in his chapter on duration (which refers to discourse rather than narrating speed). The German term *Erzahlzeit* maps onto this phenomenon, albeit somewhat imprecisely, but has not been widely disseminated into English-language narratology.

⁴³ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 20.

⁴⁴ A number of theorists have challenged this assertion recently, especially with regard to the gradual but no less traumatic experience of living under colonial oppression. See, for example, Katherine Baxter. 2011: 'Memory and Photography: Rethinking Postcolonial Trauma Studies', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47(1), 18–29; and Rothberg, who notes that 'the "event"- or "accident"-based model of trauma associated with Caruth assumes the circumstances of white, Western privilege and distracts from "insidious" forms of trauma that involve everyday, repeated forms of traumatizing violence, such as sexism, racism, and colonialism' (89).

⁴⁵ Not only is the fact of circularity important, so too is the date itself: 31 October 1998, the appropriateness of which (Halloween) for a text focused so intently on the uncanny hardly needs stating.